

Lessons from the California Recall

Remarks for the Workshop on Democratic Governance
American Association of Law Schools Annual Conference
San Francisco, January 6, 2005

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The recall of Governor Gray Davis and simultaneous election of Arnold Schwarzenegger provide a unique window on aspects of elections and democratic institutions that are not limited to statewide recall elections. Although one must be wary of drawing general conclusions about the political process from an unusual event such as the statewide recall, this election can serve as a way to think about broader issues relevant not only to future recalls but also to candidate and issue elections in California and throughout the nation. In these remarks, I will focus on two aspects of the recall that provide broader insights into the laws shaping democratic institutions. First, the recall demonstrated the significant and sometimes troubling role that money plays in modern campaigns, as well as the difficulty of constructing effective and comprehensive campaign finance laws. Second, the recall saliently demonstrated the interaction between direct democracy and representative democracy. In states with a hybrid system like California, these two forms of democracy influence each other – a reality that we have seen as Governor Schwarzenegger threatens to use initiatives to pressure a recalcitrant legislature to do his bidding and that we witnessed during the November 2004 election as ballot measures influenced turnout in and results of candidate elections. A complete analysis of democratic institutions in the United States necessarily involves understanding that they operate in a Hybrid Democracy – neither wholly representative nor wholly direct, but a complex combination of both at the local and state levels, which in turn influence national politics.

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